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ABSTRACT

It can be argued that education was rather late in adopting and responding to postmodernism. A reason for education to engage with postmodernism can be related to the educational project which was closely connected to some of the central ideas of modernity and a central element of modernism and modernization. For some, postmodernism implies relativism, a world without direction. This paper is an attempt to move beyond the modern/postmodern debate, which has been built on the framework of objectivism and relativism. The paper does not attempt to move beyond postmodernism, but instead explores the postmodern exposition and questioning of totalization in postmodern (ethical and political) terms, vice modern (epistemological and metaphysical) terms. It does this through the community view, by looking at different ways to understand the idea of community. It exposes and questions the totalizing tendencies of a specific way to understand community through the exercise of opening up; proposing to task education to follow this exercise methodology. The main point is that a person's subjectivity, that which makes a person a unique, singular being, is of an ethical nature. (Contains 25 references and 3 notes.) (BT)

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"The community of those who have nothing in common."
Re-affirming the ethical nature of education

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April 2002.

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> "To enter into a conversation with another is to lay down one's arms and one's defenses; to throw open the gates of one's own positions; to expose oneself to the other, the outsider; and to lay oneself open to surprises, contestation, and inculpation. It is to risk what one found or produced in common."
>
> Alphonso Lingis, 1994, p.87

Introduction: The ethics of postmodernism

The notion of 'postmodernism' has been around in educational circles for at least fifteen years. One could argue that education was rather late in adopting and responding to postmodernism. Other fields, such as philosophy, art and social theory, were well on their way with exploring what postmodernism was 'about,' before education got hold of it (or it got hold of education). There was, however, every reason for education to engage with postmodernism. Perhaps the most important reason has to do with the fact that the educational 'project' -- both the Project with a capital 'P' that is concerned with the emancipation of humanity through the development of reason, and the many educational projects with a small 'p' that have been going on in the schools and other educational settings up to the present day -- was not only

closely connected to some of the central ideas of modernity, but was part and parcel and perhaps even the most central element of modernity and modernization (see, e.g., Usher & Edwards, 1994). If we think of postmodernism as a questioning of modernism and/or modernity, then it is in a sense *inevitable* for educators and educationalists to take this questioning seriously and to respond to it.

Educators and educationalists have indeed responded in a range of different ways. Some have embraced postmodernism as the new paradigm for education. Others have responded more cautiously. But by far the strongest response has come from those who see postmodernism as a threat to education and therefore as something that has to be rejected outright. Although we should be aware that 'postmodernism' is a complex and multi-layered concept -- Is postmodernism *against* modernism, does it come *after* modernism, or is it a phase of modernism? Is it a condition or a position, and 'ism'? And what is the relationship between postmodernism, postmodernity, poststructuralism, neopragmatism and deconstruction? -- it seems fair to say that those who have responded negatively to postmodernism have in most cased equated it with *relativism*, i.e., with the idea that anything goes, or that we can at least no longer assume that our criteria transcend our local, historical, and cultural position. This implies, so the critics of postmodern relativism argue, that if we embrace postmodernism we will end up in a situation in which we not only will have to accept strange, outrageous and irrational ideas and worldviews, a situation in which we can no longer make a distinction between good and bad, and where questions about values, ethics and politics simply become a matter of taste. Postmodernism implies, in other words, a world without direction. It is the ultimate subversion of the achievements of modernity and Enlightenment. Postmodern relativism, in short, brings us back to the pre-modern battlefield of competing clans, tribes, groups, and nations -- each with their own truths and own values and with nothing more than that.

Rather then engaging in this discussion (which I have done elsewhere -- see, for example, Biesta, 1994; 1995; 1999a -- and which many others have done very adequately), I want to emphasize at this point that for me postmodernism has never been about this kind of relativism, the relativism which renders everything meaningless and futile. One reason for

this is that I don't see postmodernism as an attempt to replace objectivism and universalism with relativism, but rather as an attempt to show that objectivism and relativism are part of the same (modern) 'language game,' and that the point of postmodernism is to leave this language game 'behind' (a line of thinking which is already central in the work of pragmatists and neopragmatists; see, for example, Dewey, 1980[1929]; Bernstein, 1983; Rorty, 1980). Secondly, because for me postmodernism has never been about epistemology and metaphysics -- itself typical modern endeavors -- but first and foremost about ethical and political issues. For me, the main point of postmodernism is to expose the totaling tendencies of modernism -- in modern life, in modern philosophy, in modern science, in modern social theory, in modern education -- in order to highlight the exclusion and injustice brought about by the attempt to articulate a total, all-encompassing perspective. This is, for example, how we can read Foucault's thesis of the end of man -- *not* as an attempt to erase humankind or humanity from the surface of the earth, but rather as an attempt to show that humanism, the idea that we can ultimately *know* who we are and that we can use this knowledge as a foundation for the way in which we organize our lives (in politics, in education), limits and excludes possible other ways of being human (see Foucault, 1966; Biesta, 1998). We can understand Derrida and deconstruction in a similar way -- *not* as an attempt to argue that there are no foundations (such anti-foundationalism still operates within the modern language game of foundations and their rejection), but rather as an attempt to ask the question from what site "or non-site" (Derrida, 1984, p.108) it is possible to put foundations into question. The purpose of such an enterprise is not destructive but *affirmative*, it is an affirmation of what is other, what is excluded. The point of deconstruction, in other words, is to "open up" (Derrida).

To expose and question totalization only appears as relativism if we stay within the binary language game which assumes that everything is either objective or relative. For me, the point of postmodernism is not only to go beyond this language game but to do so in order to explore to what extent a peaceful co-existence of what is incommensurable might be possible. We could refer to the point of postmodernism with the notion of 'justice' -- and Derrida has indeed argued that ultimately deconstruction *is* justice (see Derrida, 1992b, p.35) -- if, that is,

we keep in mind that the very meaning of 'justice' may well have been affected by the shift from modernism to postmodernism.

If, therefore, this paper is an attempt to move beyond the modern/postmodern debate, it is precisely that, i.e., an attempt to move beyond the *debate* between modernism and postmodernism as it has been framed on the 'axis' of objectivism and relativism. Such a framing of the discussion stays safely in the modern 'camp.' My attempt in this paper is not to move beyond postmodernism itself, but rather to explore the postmodern exposition and questioning of totalization in postmodern (i.e., ethical and political) terms, rather than in modern (i.e., epistemological and metaphysical) terms. The lens through which I want to do this is called 'community.' I want to look at different ways to understand the idea of community. Or, to be more precise: I want to expose and question the totalizing tendencies of a specific way to understand community in order to open up such an understanding for its other. I want to explore what kind of understanding of community follows from such an exercise and I want to point to the possible task for education in such an 'opening up.'

Communities

What is -- or constitutes -- a community?

The rational community

In his book *The community of those who have nothing in common*, Alphonso Lingis observes that community is usually conceived as constituted by a member of individuals having something in common -- a common language, a common conceptual framework -- and building something in common: a nation, a polis, an institution (see Lingis, 1994, p.ix). A special 'instance' or 'case' of this kind of community is what Lingis calls the *rational community* (e.g., ibid., p.10, p.109). The rational community is not simply constituted by a common stock of observations, maximes for action, and common beliefs, but produces and is produced by a common discourse in a much stronger sense (see ibid., p.109). In the rational community,

> the insights of individuals are formulated in universal categories, such that they are detached from the here-now index of the one who first formulated them. (...) The common discourse is ... a rational system in which, ideally, everything that is said implicates the laws and theories of rational discourse. (ibid., p.110)

The rational community -- or to be more precise: the *membership* of the rational community -- makes it possible for people to speak as "rational agents" (ibid., p.110), i.e., through speaking as "a representative of the common discourse" (ibid., p.110). When we speak as a representative of rational culture, we are engaged in what Lingis calls "serious speech" (ibid., p.112). "The seriousness in it is the weight of the rational imperative that determines what is to be said" (ibid., p.112). What matters, therefore, in serious speech, is *what* is said. We expect from doctors, veterinarians or electricians (Lingis's examples) that they speak seriously, that they speak according to the rules and principles of the rational discourse of the rational community of which they are a representative. This implies, however, that the way in which things are said -- "(t)he vocalization of what has to be said in this particular voice, by this particular speaker" (ibid., p.112) -- is *inessential*.

> (T)he very saying is inessential, since what has to be said exists in the literature in the public libraries, or if not, is implicated already in the governing categories, theories, and methods of rational discourse. (ibid., p.112)

In the rational community we are therefore *interchangeable*. It doesn't really matter who says something, as long as what is being said 'makes sense.' The rational community thus affords individuals one (specific) way into communication. It is the way,

> by which one depersonalizes one's visions and insights, formulates them in terms of the common rational discourse, and speaks as a representative, a

spokesperson, equivalent and interchangeable with others, of what has to be said (ibid., p.116).

It will not be too difficult to recognize the role of education -- the role of schools and other educational institutions -- in the constitution and reproduction of rational communities. Many people might well be inclined to argue that this is the main and perhaps even the only task of schools, and the one and only reason for having schools in the first place. If we look at education from this perspective, we can see that schools do not simply provide students with a voice, they do not simply learn their students to speak. Schools rather provide students with a very specific voice, viz., the voice of the rational communities it represents through the curriculum. In giving students such a voice, schools not only legitimize certain ways of speaking but at the very same time de-legitimize other ways of speaking (and the notion of 'rationality' is itself the main semantic marker around which battles about voice are fought). This is, as sociologists of education have shown us, why some students have to 'unlearn' much more than others in order to succeed in the educational system.

The modern community and the modern society

Lingis depicts the rational community primarily in epistemological terms. For him the rational community is mainly an extension of what rational knowledge is -- or to put it in more 'contemporary' terms: the rational community is an extension of what certain people hold rational knowledge to be (see, e.g., Bloor, 1976; Barnes, 1977; Apple, 1979). Whether the rational community is a 'good thing' or a 'bad thing' is something which from Lingis's perspective is difficult to ask (although he argues, see below, that there is a way in which the rational community is problematic). If we look at the (idea of the) rational community from a more sociological perspective -- and to do this I will rely on the work of Zygmunt Bauman -- it could be argued that this community bears all the characteristics of what Bauman sees as being typical of a modern community or, in more general terms, modern society (which I put in the singular because ultimately there can only be one 'rational' society; see below).

Bauman describes the modern society and the modern state as a state of *order*. The modern project, so he argues, was meant "to free the individual from inherited identity" (Bauman,

1995, p.203), that is, to give individuals "the benefit of an absolute beginning, set them free to choose the kind of life they wish to live and to monitor and manage its living in the framework of legal rules spelled out by the sole legitimate powers" (ibid., p.203). The modern state, in other words, wanted to free individual from their pre-modern situation and situatedness. The only possible way of doing this was to elevate individuals to something which itself is *beyond all tradition*. This not only means that the state needs to engage in a systematic "discrediting, disavowing and uprooting of the intermediary powers of communities and traditions" (ibid., p.203). It also mans that the state has to be guided (and in fact was and to a large extent still is guided) by one singular, post-traditional vision in order to establish the only possible post-traditional order.

Again it is not too difficult to recognize the role of modern education is this project, since modern education has precisely been understood as the attempt to bring children and students 'beyond the present and the particular' (Bailey) of their 'rooted' identity, into the orderly, rational realm of modern society. The point of modern education is, indeed, to 'release' children and students from their local, historical and cultural perspective and bring them into contact with the general point of view (for an analysis and critique of this process see Biesta, in press).

What is important about Bauman's depiction of the modern state is not only that it gives us a more 'real' account of what a rational community might look like. Bauman is also able to show how this community, the rational community of the modern state, brought with it a very specific 'approach' to what is outside of and other than itself, i.e., the *stranger*.

Bauman argues that all societies produce their own kind of strangers. Strangers are the people "who do not fit the cognitive, moral, or aesthetic map of the world" (ibid., p.200). Each community, to put it differently, has its "constitutive outside" (Mouffe, 1993, p.141), which consists of those who are outside of the community, those who 'are' not what the community 'is' and in a sense make the purity and identity of the community possible by staying outside. Bauman emphasizes, however, that since modern society was based upon one, post-traditional 'vision,' it could give no place at all to the strangers it produced (and perhaps

we should repeat this in the present tense). The "progressive universalization of the human condition" (ibid., p.202) which was *the* defining characteristic of modern society and modernity more generally, dealt with the strangers it produces in two different, though related ways. The first strategy is that of assimilation, a strategy which Bauman characterizes as *anthropophagic* (which literally means man-eating), which comes down to a process of "annihilating the strangers by *devouring* them and then metabolically transforming them into a tissue indistinguishable from one's own" (ibid., p.201). The other strategy was *anthropoemic*: "*vomiting* the strangers, banishing them from the limits of the orderly world and barring them from all communication with those inside" (ibid., p.201). This is the strategy of *exclusion*, a strategy which ultimately resulted in the physical destruction of strangers (see ibid., p.202 -- and perhaps we should repeat this sentence in the present tense as well).[1]

The one and only thing that wasn't an option under the "progressive universalization of the human condition," Bauman argues, is the idea of a *permanent coexistence* with the stranger and the strange. "The pragmatics of living with strangers," he concludes, "did not need to be faced point blank as a serious project" (ibid., p.202).[2]

The postmodern stranger

If we combine Lingis's articulation of the rational community with Bauman's depiction of the modern community, we can see that from the point of view of this community -- i.e., for those who are *inside* of this community -- those with whom we have nothing in common, the strangers, appear as a problem, as something that needs to be overcome, either by making the stranger similar to us, or by making the stranger 'invisible'. The latter can either be done in a conceptual sense (for example by redescribing the stranger as basically one of us, one of humankind, but only other in terms of the influence of culture and history: this is the strategy of multiculturalism), or in a very real, physical sense (through the assimilation/annihilation of the stranger).

It should not be forgotten, however, that the conclusion that strangers are a problem that needs to be overcome and solved, only follows if we assume that the rational community is

the only feasible, the only possible community, that it is, in more normative terms, the *best* option, the best community that we can envisage.

Some people might argue that this is indeed the case, and the reason they might give for this -- an 'educational' reason -- is that it is only through becoming a member of the rational community that people acquire a voice, an ability to speak. While the defenders of the rational community might abhor the idea that the rational community can only exists if it destroys the stranger, they might well be in favor of a strong version of assimilation (and are perhaps unable to see that this always also implies annihilation, or they might want to argue that this is the price to be paid for the "progressive universalization" of humankind and the human condition.[3]

Bauman's response to the foregoing line of thinking is partly 'empirical,' in that he argues that our postmodern society has changed so much that it simply is no longer viable to assume that the stranger can be kept outside. The postmodern stranger is "here to stay" (ibid., p.213). Postmodern society, Bauman argues, has become *heterophilic* (ibid., p.213) in that our "postmodern times are marked by an almost universal agreement that difference is not merely unavoidable, but good, precious, and in need of protection and cultivation" (ibid., p.214). But he hastens to add that this should not result in a return to a premodern plurality of "tribes," because in that case the essentialism of the modern project, the modern idea that ultimately there was only one right way to do and think, would only be replaced by another form of essentialism. That would be the situation "where re-empowerment turns into a new disempowerment and emancipation into a new oppression" (ibid., 215).

According to Bauman there is a "genuine emancipatory chance" in postmodernity, "the chance of laying down arms, suspending border skirmishes waged to keep the stranger away, taking apart the daily erected mini-Berlin walls meant to keep distance and to separate" (ibid., p.216). But this chance does *not* lie "in the celebration of born-again ethnicity and in genuine or invented tribal tradition" (ibid., p.216). It doesn't lie, in other words, in returning to forms of 'strong community' such as the rational community, but rather

> in bringing to its conclusion the 'disembedding' work of modernity, through laying bare the intricate process of subject self-formation, through revealing the conditions of individual freedom which ... constitute the hard core of citizenship (ibid., p.216).

What Bauman is arguing for here, is that the genuine emancipatory chance of postmodernism is not to be found in a 'new tribalism' in which we simply affirm our own, tribal identity, but rather has to do with the question what it means to be a subject, something which for Bauman has to do with freedom and citizenship. The latter link suggests -- and this is something Bauman has developed in much detail in other writings, most significantly his *Postmodern ethics* (Bauman, 1993; see also Biesta & Stams, 2001) -- that subjectivity, being a subject, is *not* something that has to do with the tribe we belong to (it is not, in other words, about identity), but rather is 'social' in that it is connected with freedom and citizenship. To be/become a subject -- emancipation -- has to do with acting in the public space, the space where we act with others, and ultimately with being responsible for the other. This is why Bauman writes that moral responsibility "is the first reality of the self" (Bauman, 1993, p.13), and that it is "the act of self-constitution" (ibid., p.14). The emancipatory possibilities of postmodernism are therefore to be found in our 'membership' of, to use Lingis's phrase, the community of those who have nothing in common. It is to be found in the situation where we are in a sense all strangers for each other (which for Bauman is precisely what distinguishes the postmodern stranger from the modern stranger).

> The chance of human togetherness depends on the rights of the stranger and not on the answer to the question who is entitled -- the state or the tribe -- to decide who the strangers are. (Bauman, 1995, p.216)

The community of those who have nothing in common

Bauman's approach raises several questions. On a general level there is the question as to how we should understand this "community without community" (Derrida, 1997). On a more specific level there is the question of voice: what kind of voice, what kind of speech and speaking is possible outside of the rational community -- if any? And there is the question

what education might have to do in this constellation. To find an answer to the first two questions we need to go back to Lingis.

We have seen that the rational community is constituted by a common language and a common logic. It gives us a voice, but only the voice of a representative. The rational community allows us to speak, but only in the language of that community. It does matter what we say, but it does not matter who is saying it. But what, then, does it mean to speak 'outside' of the rational community? What voice can we use if we want to speak with the stranger, with the one with whom -- by definition -- we don't share a common language?

To find an answer to this question, Lingis examines limit cases of communication. One such case has to do with the way in which we 'are' with someone who is dying. What can one say in such a situation? Anything one tries to say sounds vacuous and absurd in one's mouth. But the point of speaking in such a situation is not about *what* you say. That almost doesn't matter -- although we know all too well that we do not want to say the wrong thing. What matters most, what matters only is *that* you say something, no matter what. To speak with someone who is dying brings you in a situation where there is no common language, where, as Lingis puts it,

> the problem is not simply that you do not have the skills in speaking or that you cannot come up with the right things to say because you have no experiences in this kind of situation, but that language itself does not have the powers (Lingis, 1994, p.108).

What makes this situation different from the way in which the rational community gives us a voice, is not only that it does not matter *what* you say but *that* you are saying something, that what matters, in other words, is the saying and not the said. The most important difference is that the voice with which you 'speak' to the one with which you have nothing in common is not a borrowed voice, but your *own* voice, and no one else's.

The other limit case Lingis discusses is the one where we are not at the end of language but at the beginning of it: the situation where parents and children communicate without being able

to rely on the language, logic and voice of the rational community, simply because the first communication comes *before* this community. This is again a situation in which the parent cannot speak to the child with the borrowed, representative voice of the rational community, but where it matters most that the parent responds and takes responsibility for the child in a unique, unprecedented and always new way. Lingis depicts this encounter as follows:

> It is the last warm day of the autumn; the mother has to go to the park with her child. She forgets all the letters she has to write and the conference she has to prepare for this weekend; she forgets all her friends. She is totally absorbed in her task. She is seated at the pool, and a rainbow gleams across the fountain in the late-autumn sun. She is pointing to the rainbow in the pool. Her eyes are open wide and gleaming, jubilation trembling the coaxing lines of her mouth. She has to lead his eyes to it. This day. His eyes are too young to be able to see the rainbow in the sky. Next year it will be too late; he will be in kindergarten, with eyes already jaded by the electronic rainbows on television screens; he will have to look at books with pictures associated with the letters of the alphabet. She has to fix the focus of his eyes and teach them to see it. She has to teach him the word: rainbow. Rainbow in the fountain. He has to learn the word and the wonder. She is wholly concentrated with the difficulty and the urgency of the task. She watches with anxiety and jubilation as the wonder fills his eyes, his eyes becoming wet with laughter, until she sees the rainbow in them. (ibid., pp.116-117)

Who, therefore, speaks in these limit situations, in these situations in which we cannot fall back upon the representative voice of the rational community? Lingis writes:

> What is it that speaks in these terminal and inaugural situations? Not the ego as a rational mind, as a representative of universal reason that possesses the a priori categories and the a priori forms of the rational organization of sensory

> impressions. What speaks is someone in his or her materiality as an earthling. (ibid., p.117)

This implies, that when we speak with the voice of the rational community, it is not really *I* who is speaking. My voice is simply the interchangeable voice of the rational community. But when I speak to the stranger, when I expose myself to the stranger, when I want to speak in the community of those who have nothing in common, then I have to find my own voice, then it is *I* who has to speak, and no one else. This provides a way of understanding Bauman's ideas, since it can not only be argued that we only speak for ourselves, as ourselves, in the situation in which we are part of this community without community. We can also say that it is this very way of speaking which constitutes us as a unique individual -- as *I* and no one else.

Although we now can see who it is that has to speak in the encounter with the stranger, we need to say a bit more about the 'language' that we can use in this encounter. What is it that we can say, what are we actually saying when we speak for ourselves, outside of the rational community? I want to argue that the language that we use in such encounters should not be understood as a language in the sense of a set of words and sounds. It is not about what is *said*, but basically about what is *done*. And what is done, what needs to be done, and what only I can do, is to respond to the stranger, to be responsive and responsible to what the stranger 'asks' from me.

> The other turns to me and speaks; he or she asks something of me. Her words, which I understand because they are the words of my own tongue, ask for information and indications. They ask for a response that will be responsible, will give reasons for its reasons and will be a commitment to answer for what it answers. But they first greet me with an appeal for responsiveness. (ibid., pp.130-131)

The 'language' with which we can speak with the stranger, the 'language' which gives us our own, unique and singular voice is, in other words, the language of responsively and

responsibility. It doesn't matter what words we use -- because there are, in a sense, no words. It only matters that we respond, that we take responsibility, that we take *our* responsibility. The community of those who have nothing in common, the community of strangers, the community without community, is therefore of an ethical nature, it is constituted by our response to the stranger, the one who asks, seeks -- demands, as Levinas would say -- *my* response, who seeks to hear *my* unique voice.

But the only way in which we can speak with our own voice, is when we let go of our other voice. This means that the other community is a "community that demands that the one who has his own communal identity, who produces his own nature, expose [sic] himself to the one with whom he has nothing in common, the stranger" (ibid., p.10).

Lingis emphasizes that exposing oneself to the stranger, exposing oneself to "an imperative" (ibid., p.11) is not something one does with one's rational intelligence. It is not, in other words, that our response is based upon knowledge of the other. It is not that we first have to know what we will be responsible for and only then can decide to take up this responsibility or not.

> It is with the nakedness of one's eyes that one exposes oneself to the other, with one's hands arrested in their grip on things and turned now to the other, open-handed, and with the disarmed frailty of one's voice troubled with the voice of another. (ibid., p.11)

Responsibility is, in other words, not about calculation. It is in a very fundamental sense without ground and it is in an equally fundamental sense unlimited. Derrida explains this point as follows.

> When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make; irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program... It makes of action the applied consequence, the

> simple application of a knowledge or know-how. It makes of ethics and politics a technology. No longer of the order of practical reason or decision, it begins to be irresponsible. (Derrida, 1992a, p.41, p.45)

The rational community and the other community

One final point to make in our exploration of the idea of 'community' is that the rational community and the 'other' community should not be understood as two separate communities, nor as two options that we can choose from. There is no way to deny the importance of the rational community -- or rational communities -- since they make certain ways of speaking (and doing) possible. We should, of course, not forget that this speaking is only representative speaking. And we also shouldn't forget that each time a rational community is constituted, it draws a border line, it creates at the very same time an inside and an outside. Lingis writes:

> The community that produces something in common, that establishes truth and that now establishes a technological universe of simulacra, excludes the savages, the mystics, the psychotics -- excludes their utterances and their bodies. (Lingis, 1994, p.13)

From this it follows that the other community forms, comes into presence, in the *interruption* of the work and the enterprises of the rational community. The other community "recurs, ... troubles the rational community, as its double or its shadow" (ibid., p.10). It lives 'inside' the rational community as a constant possibility, and comes into presence as soon as one responds to the other, to the otherness of the other, to what is strange in relation to the discourse and logic of the rational community. It comes into existence when one speaks in one's own voice, with the voice that is unique, singular, unprecedented. The voice that has never been heard before.

Education

The foregoing exploration of the notion of 'community' reveals that there are (at least) two different ways to understand what it might mean to be, to live with others. Both communities provide an "entry into communication" (see Lingis, 1994, p.116), but we have seen that it is precisely here, i.e., in the way in which the two communities 'allow' us to speak, that there lies a radical difference. Not only are the two communities different in that in one community what is matters is what is said, while in the other it as about the saying of what is said. It is also the case that in the rational community we speak with a representative voice, while in the other community we speak in our own, unique and unprecedented way. This means that it is only in and through our engagement with the other community, i.e., in and through the way we expose ourselves to what is strange and other, that we come into the world as unique and singular beings (and not as instances of some more general 'form' of what it is to be human).

In passing I have already made some connections between the rational community and education, mainly by arguing that the most visible function of schools seems to lie in its role in initiating children and students in the/a rational community. To make the connection with education in a more explicit manner, I want to have a look at the different conceptions of learning that can be attached to -- and presumably are assumed in -- the two different 'conceptions' of community, the rational community and the 'other' community.

The most common -- and presumably most influential -- conception of learning, is one which basically conceives of learning in terms of *acquisition*: the acquisition of something external, such as knowledge, values or skills, something which existed before the 'act' of learning and which becomes the possession of the learner as a result of his or her learning. Psychologists have many different theories about this kind of learning, ranging from accounts of learning in terms of changes in the brain cells to accounts of learning as a thoroughly social enterprise, e.g., as legitimate peripheral participation. Despite the different explanations of the way in which people learn, all these theories rely upon the idea of learning as acquisition. This approach fits the rational community quite well. One could indeed argue that the only way in which individuals can become a member of the rational community is through the acquisition of the content and logic that make up the (a) rational community. And one could further argue that the educational system of many countries is precisely based upon this idea.

There is, however, another way to understand learning -- and another way of learning -- one which does not think of learning as the acquisition of something that already exists, but instead sees learning as responding, as a response to a 'question.' If we look at learning in this way, we can say that someone has learned something *not* when he or she is able to copy and reproduce what already existed, but when someone reacts and responds to what is unfamiliar, what is different, what challenges, irritates or even disturbs. Here learning is an invention or creation, it is a process of bringing something new into the world, viz., one's own, unique response, one's own voice. This way of understanding learning -- about which there is much more to say (see, e.g., Säfström & Biesta, in press; Biesta, 2001) -- seems to be much more appropriate for the learning that has to do with the 'other' community.

I am inclined to believe that the latter learning is the learning that is educationally the most significant and important, since it has to do with the 'coming into presence' (Biesta, 1999b) of individuals as unique, singular beings and it is the latter which should be the ultimate concern of education and educators. We shouldn't forget or deny, of course, that we live in a world of rational communities (or to put it in modern terms: a world of a rational community), that these communities are important for specific purposes and that the main reason why we have schools, at least from a historical point of view, is in order to reproduce the world of rational communities. But we also shouldn't forget that this is not all that matters in life -- and that it is perhaps even the case that what ultimately matters in life is not the reproduction of rational communities but the possibility for the other community to come and stay into existence. If the other community would no longer be possible, then we could say that the world has come to an end, since if the world would only be a rational community, than it would no longer matter who would live in that world and who wouldn't: we would, after all, be interchangeable.

This is what makes the other community, the community of those who have nothing in common, so important for education -- and one of the questions that needs to be asked is how much education is actually possible in our schools. The problem with the other community, however, is that it cannot be brought into existence in any deliberate or technical way. The

other community is *not* the result of work, it doesn't come into existence through the application of a technique or technology. In this respect the other community can never become a new educational tool or a new educational program. We cannot make or force our students to expose themselves to what is other and different and strange. The only thing that we can do is to make sure that there are at least opportunities within education -- within schools and other institutionalized settings, to be more precise -- to encounter what is different, strange and other, and that there are opportunities for our students to really respond, to find their own voice, their own way of speaking. We, as teachers and educators, should be aware that what disrupts the smooth operation of the rational community is not necessarily a disturbance of the educational process, but might well be the very point at which students begin to speak.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the notion of 'community' in order to see whether the use of this 'lens' can help us to find a way to move beyond the modern/postmodern debate that has captured education and educationalists over the past fifteen years. The main claim of this paper is that our subjectivity, that what makes is into unique, singular beings, is of an ethical 'nature.' It is in and through the ways in which we respond to the other, to the otherness of the other, to what is strange and different in the other -- and to respond means to take responsibility and be responsible -- that we come into the world as unique, singular beings. Following Bauman we can say that this way to understand our subjectivity neither reduces who we are to the communities, tribes, or clans that we are part of (our 'identity'), nor 'elevates' our subjectivity to some universal mode of rationality. The emancipatory potential of postmodernism lies precisely in envisaging this third 'option' (which, if we are to follow Levinas, is not so much an option as the condition we find ourselves in). Against this background I have further argued that we should think of education as being concerned first and foremost with the opportunities for human beings to come into the world, to come into presence as unique, singular beings. The first concern for education is about how children and students can learn to speak in their own voice. This is not exclude or deny the role of

education (schooling) in the reproduction of the rational community, but there is always the question how much education is actually possible in our schools.

What is postmodern about all this -- and hence might be able to help us to go beyond the modern/postmodern debate, or at least beyond the modern representation of this debate -- is that the 'categories' that I have used are not those of epistemology and metaphysics, but rather those of ethics and politics. The origin of our subjectivity is not to be thought of in terms of our consciousness or our rational mind (epistemology), nor can it be thought of as an 'essence' (metaphysics). What constitutes our subjectivity is the way in which we -- you and I as singular beings -- respond. We may want to call this our 'response-ability' as long as we are aware that this 'ability' is not our ultimate (ontological) essence. There is, after all, no guarantee that people will respond, no mechanism which makes us respond. We may be *vulnerable* beings, but vulnerability does not automatically translate into responsibility and responsive action.

Responsibility, as I have argued, is not about what we already know. Responsibility excludes and opposes calculation. It is precisely for this reason that responsibility is related to the community of those who have nothing in common, the community with whom we have nothing to share -- but can only give to. It is this community, so we could argue, which makes our 'second birth' -- our coming into the world as unique, individual beings -- possible. Like our first, physical birth, this is not necessarily a pleasant experience. It can be difficult and painful to come into the world, to take upon us the responsibility that is waiting for us, to expose ourselves to what is other and different. Yet this is what makes us human and unique. Just as our responsibility is not based upon knowledge, we can also say that what teachers and educators can do to 'help,' 'support' the coming into presence of their students is itself unprecedented. Each case is unique and there is no common language -- let alone a technique -- which tells us what to do and what to say. This is not to say that we are completely empty-handed, because we can make use of our previous experiences and of the experience of others. But ultimately teachers will need to invent their response to the uniqueness of their students again and again.

Notes

1. If we once more look at education from this point of view, we can argue that modern education and modern schooling have played -- and are still playing -- an important role in this process, either as the great assimilator or as an annihilator, and more often than not a combination of the two strategies, since to assimilate means at the same time to destroy what makes the strangers strange and other.

2. I want to remind the reader that the foregoing -- and what follows -- is not meant to suggest that all otherness or strangeness is simply good and simply has to be valued and respected because it is other and strange. There are real -- and very difficult -- practical questions about, for example, the limits of toleration, one being who has to tolerate who. The most important lesson to learn from the foregoing seems to me to be the insight into the way in which the stranger is *produced* as a result of a specific construction of what is own, proper, familiar, rational. It is not to imply that everything that is other is categorically good. It is first and foremost to see that what 'counts' as strange depends upon what 'counts' as familiar. The stranger is, in other words, not a natural category.

3. I am aware that these are abstract words. In concrete terms we need only to think of one of President George W. Bush's statements made after September 11, viz., the one in which he said that one is either on his side or on the side of the terrorists.

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